Kurdish Studies
May 2021
Volume: 9, No: 1, pp. 1 – 9
ISSN: 2051-4883 (Print) | ISSN 2051-4891 (Online)
www.KurdishStudies.net
TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

Received: 28 March 2021
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/ks.v9i1.634

Editorial:

Mass Violence and the Kurds: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Introduction

This special issue of *Kurdish Studies* focuses on the 20th-century mass violence that took place in Kurdistan, of which the Kurds were often victims and at times also perpetrators. The issue brings together a series of articles engaging with the historical backgrounds, causes, courses, and consequences of those episodes of violence, and aims to make a contribution to this debate by looking at the Kurds' (specifically, northern Kurdistan under Ottoman and Turkish control) encounter with modern mass political violence from a variety of perspectives. The articles address issues germane to mass violence and the Kurds, by offering theoretical engagement as well as empirical recreation. This introductory article pleads for more in-depth research that uses different approaches towards violence; comparison by juxtaposition, diachronic perspectives, and studies on transnational transfer of justifications and practices of violence by political elites.

Thereafter, we open with Naif Bezwan's article, which provides a new perspective on the problem of colonial state rule and violence in Kurdistan, by examining four major massacres of Kurds in the Kemalist period. He argues that colonial violence can be disaggregated into ideological, ethnocidal and genocidal violence, all of which converged on establishing direct coercive control over the Kurds in Turkey. Mehmet Polatel's article focuses on the 1895 massacres of Armenians in the town of Bitlis, in which a varied group of perpetrators killed large numbers of local Armenian civilians. The article challenges conventional understandings of the Hamidian massacres and nuances both the involvement and resistance of certain Kurdish tribes during the killings. Adnan Çelik examines the violent conflict between the Hizbullah and the PKK in the 1990s, by unpacking the binary political cleavage between these two armed groups. Çelik's research unsettles monocausal explanations of Hizbullah by placing it in a long-term context of Kurdish politics, which has seen a number of ideological ruptures, of which the 1990s is one instance. Finally, Özgür Sevgi Göral situates the phenomenon of forced disappearances within the broader context of state violence against Kurds and memory spaces from the perspective of the dialectics of secrecy and visibility. She follows the trajectory

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of the Saturday Mothers in Cizre, and argues that their performances constitute acts of memory making. We hope that this special issue will offer food for thought and a step up to future studies and discussions of the Kurds' encounter with political violence.

The issue also includes two other important articles. First, an interview with Professor Shahrzad Mojab, who is co-founder of the Kurdish Women's Studies Network (KWSN), conducted by Marlene Schäfers. The interview follows up on the discussion initiated by a group of Kurdish women who drew attention to male violence and harassment within Kurdish Studies through an anonymous letter. As we made clear in the editorial of the journal's October 2020 issue, this is a discussion that *Kurdish Studies* deems important. In the interview, Mojab reflects on her personal and professional involvement with Kurdish women, and speaks about gender relations and power in Kurdish society and academia. Secondly, an obituary of Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul, written by Nodar Mossaki. Rasul was trained in literary studies in the USSR, in a period when Kurdish Studies flourished there. Studying the early modern Kurdish poet Ahmed Khani, and dimensions of Sufi theosophy in Kurdish literature, Rasul stands out as an ambitious scholar who went beyond standard Soviet treatments of literary works. The issue concludes with book reviews and a review article, many of which discuss works related to violence.

The Kurds and mass violence

The Kurds' experience with modern mass violence is long and complex. Whereas Kurds lived under the Kurdish Emirates for centuries in pre-national conditions in the Ottoman and Persian empires, the advent of nationalism and colonialism in the Middle East radically changed the situation. World War I was a watershed for most ethnic groups in the Ottoman Empire, such as the Kurds, and some political minorities such as Armenians and Assyrians suffered genocide – including at the hands of Kurds. Moreover, the post-Ottoman order precluded the Kurds from building a nation-state of their own. Kurds were either relegated to cultural and political subordination under the Turkish and Persian nation states, or a precarious existence under alternative orders (colonialism in Syria and Iraq, and communism in the Soviet Union). The nation-state system changed the pre-national, Ottoman imperial order with culturally heterogeneous territories into a system of nation-states which began to produce nationalist homogenisation by virtue of various forms of population policies.

In Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, Kurds became victims of these policies, which, in some infamous cases, veered towards genocide and genocidal massacres. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the Kemalist government launched violent and invasive 'Turkification' policies, for example by suppressing the Sheikh Said rebellion of 1925 and the Ağrı rebellion of 1930 through genocidal massacres. This was followed in 1938 by the genocide in Dersim, which went beyond mass murder and also included forced cultural assimilation. In 1946, the declared Republic of Kurdistan centred in Mahabad, Eastern Kurdistan, under Iranian control, was similarly suppressed by Iranian state. Also, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Khomeini's apparatus of violence suppressed a Kurdish uprising by executing thousands of combatants and civilians. In Iraq and Syria, Kurds suffered from similar forms of 'Arabisation', ranging from genocidal to non-violent but discriminatory policies. Possibly the most violent collective experience the Kurds had with violence was in Iraq, where Saddam Hussein's *Anfal* campaign of the 1980s culminated in several chemical massacres, including infamously at Halabja in 1988. Counterinsurgency in Northern Kurdistan in the 1990s

brought more violence to those areas, resulting in massacres, environmental destruction, and mass displacement. Finally, the implosion of the Iraqi and Syrian states from 2003 and 2011 on, respectively, brought more political violence to the Kurds in both societies. In Iraq, the 'fratricidal war' between the two political parties (PDK and PUK) killed tens of thousands in what amounted in some cases to clan cleansings. Ultimately, in both Iraq and Syria, ISIS attacked Kurdish civilians indiscriminately and committed a full-blown genocide against Yazidis in the summer of 2014.

All in all, the twentieth century was an overall violent century for the Kurds and Kurdistan – as it was for much of the post-Ottoman territories. It started with the devastation of world war I, continued with western colonisation and consequent subjugation in three different nation-states, and ended with civil wars and massacres. Thus, for the Kurds, mass violence is a chronologically extended, complex, and intertwined story, with multiple perpetrators, but overall, the same group at the short end: themselves. Some of this violence aimed to absorb the survivors into society, other forms of genocidal violence attempted to excise the community from it. The scholarship on much of this violence still stands to gain a lot from in-depth studies of the historical backgrounds, causes, courses, and consequences of those episodes of violence, and must offer analyses of the experiences of victims, survivors, and perpetrators through primary sources and eyewitness accounts. These categories are of course continuously shifting, merging, and diverging, but regardless of their precise constellations and contradictions, violence against civilians remains a widespread phenomenon across Kurdistan.

Mass violence: fruitful research directions

Mass violence research is an eminently interdisciplinary field of study, which has influenced Kurdish Studies from the very beginning. Among the pioneers of the field were social scientists such as Hamit Bozarslan and Martin van Bruinessen, who published insightful pieces about the Kurds' encounter with violence, already in the violent 1990s (Bozarslan, 1999; van Bruinessen, 2000). It is crucial to place research on mass violence and the Kurds in a comparative perspective, due to the rapidly accumulating developments in the field of violence research. Mass violence is not simply the plural of murder, in which one person grabs a weapon and kills another person. On the contrary, civil wars, massacres, and genocides are complex processes of explosive political forces, and in addition to accurate, detailed empirical research, they also require comparison for the sake of calibration. We cannot know how widespread the PKK's mobilization of guerrillas was without comparisons with, say, Colombia or Sri Lanka. We cannot hope to understand Saddam's genocide without a comparison with other genocides around the same time, such as in Guatemala or Biafra. With a certain regularity, publications appear that attempt to more fully integrate increasing historical factual knowledge with comparative-theoretical insights. Such studies set out similarities and differences, highlight correlations, recognise patterns, and uncover mechanisms. Comparisons can also be a rewarding and worthwhile effort, because research on violence without models or theories runs into its limits rather quickly. Without a theoretical perspective or minimal conceptualization, one runs the risk of tracing only superficial similarities rather than delving deeper into parallel biographies, analogous structures, and similar developments. In other words, empirical density cannot be a substitute for clear argumentation. Digging for and locating relevant factual material is important, but the raw materials must be sufficiently integrated into a study as a whole. In the field of mass violence

research, three approaches have so far been paramount: juxtaposition, diachrony, and transmission.

Juxtaposition is the comparison of events or processes by placing them side by side and analysing them. Historians and political scientists have compared different cases of political violence through juxtaposition. The differences and similarities between the cases can provide a sharper picture of the peculiarity of the individual cases. They can also generate intellectual cross-pollination by making the researcher aware of specific themes. At best, this leads to a sharpened understanding of the phenomenon, but often carries with it the disadvantage of historical decontextualization. A good example of successful comparison by juxtaposition has been the fairly recent flurry of edited volumes comparing Stalinism with Nazism (Basle, 2001; Geyer, 2009; Kershaw & Lewin, 1997). In both cases, young elites from aggrieved social groups came to power through violent revolutions. Both systems leaned on a dictatorial system that permeated personal life. Both were led by dictators who wielded demagogic, charismatic leadership. Both established concentration camps in which first political opponents, then entire ethnic groups disappeared. Both employed radical political ideologies based on utopias of collective identity. Both did not hesitate to use violence against their own civilian populations. In addition to these similarities, the comparisons naturally revealed essential differences, such as the direction, nature and scale of the violence. These types of studies are useful for Kurdish Studies, in that so far, the Kurds' experience with violence has been treated as uniquely different and has not been incorporated enough in juxtaposition-style volumes, whether on state violence, civil war, or insurgency.

A second approach is the diachronic one: in this perspective, scholars want to understand why mass violence occurred repeatedly within one society. The history of Germany in the first half of the twentieth century captures the imagination the most, with the Herero genocide, First World War, Armenian genocide, Second World War and the Holocaust all occurring in the time span of only 40 years. Other examples abound: a long-term perspective on the history of Chechnya, Algeria, and Serbia also suggests that violence has been a recurring phenomenon within those societies. This kind of exercise quickly runs the risk of falling into Orientalist stereotypes about exotic regions with inherently violent cultures such as 'the Balkans' or 'the Caucasus', or 'martial races' such as Kurds, Sikhs, or Zulus. Culturalist caricatures such as these not only romanticise the perpetrators, but also downplay the experiences of the victims, who are portrayed as expendable masses of illiterate peasants or anonymous villagers. It is much more useful to ask the question: How did earlier phases affect later episodes of violence in terms of political culture, interstate power structures, or widespread mentalities? Mark Biondich and Max Bergholz's in-depth studies of political violence in the Balkans impressively takes on the twin Balkan wars of 1912-1913, World War I, World War II, and the Yugoslav civil war of the 1990s (Bergholz, 2016; Biondich, 2011). According to them, this succession of violent episodes has been, on the one hand, a product of externally imposed crises such as wars and occupation regimes. On the other hand, the conflicts have also been caused by internal continuities in the political cultures such as the lack of an overarching Yugoslav or Bosnian identity or the unprocessed traumas of the preceding episode of violence. So too, for the Kurds, the diachronic approach can yield important insights: in at least three periods in the modern era (1880-1896, 1915-1938, and 1984-1997), northern Kurdistan became the scene of large-scale violence, inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic, and against the authorities. To what extent were the earlier phases influential on later phases? Should we imagine this as a genetic, direct influence, or a genealogical, imagined influence in which later generations harked back

and utilised the past to mobilise for violence? Only a focused, diachronic study can offer explanations.

The third approach, transfer, focuses on what political elites learned from each other during and after periods of crisis and violence. This type of transnational transfer can occur between neighboring countries like the most well-known bipolar international conflicts that escalate to war and often carry the risk of war and violence: Turkey-Greece, Germany-Soviet Union, Cambodia-Vietnam, Serbia-Croatia, Iran-Iraq, Japan-China, India-Pakistan. However, transference in interstate polarisations can also occur across time and space, without direct contact between antagonistic states. Recent research has suggested that the international handling of the violence against minority populations and 'ethnic cleansings' in the post-Ottoman and post-Romanov territories between 1912 and 1923 served as a model for Eastern Europe between 1939 and 1946. In particular, the population exchange between Greece and Turkey (1923) served as a guideline in the multiple population shifts between Germany, Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania (Bloxham, 2008). Transnational transfer and influence can also be person-specific. Saddam Hussein is widely known to have idolised Stalin. Saddam had visited Stalin's *dacha* in Abkhazia in the 1970s, had books on Stalin specially translated into Arabic for his personal library, and had even modeled his workroom and bedroom after Stalin's (Aburish, 2001). It is plausible that partly because of this, Saddam understood the importance of propaganda and ideology to legitimise state violence. In any case, his party purges through show trials and summary executions, his unrestrained cult of personality, and his extensive network of secret security as intelligence services resembled Stalin's tellingly. Not to mention the violence: the collective branding of Iraqi Kurds as traitors, followed by categorical violence, neatly followed Stalin's script for the Chechens in 1944. As an eminently transnational ethnic group with a large diaspora, transfer has affected the Kurds profoundly.

All in all, these approaches can serve as useful templates in future research of Kurds and violence, and can open new lines of research in which we can not only understand the state of the Kurds better, but we can also use the fate of the Kurds to understand the world better.

Paramilitarism: a very Kurdish problem

Kurds have had a complex history of confrontation with and involvement in mass violence for more than a century. During much of this period, they have been in a condition of constant resistance in their territory of Kurdistan, which is to say the area where they reside as the majority people, divided for several decades now into four states (Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran). Kurds have generally been victims of mass violence, but sometimes perpetrators. In this spectrum of violence, the role of paramilitary groups, further to that of the official security forces of the states, has been extremely significant.

There are various, quite different definitions of paramilitary formations. Paramilitarism is mostly used for pro-state armed groups other than the official military and police institutions (Üngör, 2019, p. 6). Among the basic criteria that define paramilitarism generally are, beyond weaponisation, their ties with states, hierarchical and organisational structures, ambiguous (il)legal and (un)official positions, extra-legal actions and violence, plausible deniability, and economic expectations and relations. Scholars refer to these pro-state armed groups with different names: "vigilante," "militia," "pro-government militia," "death squad," "paramilitary," and so on(Alvarez, 2006; Campbell, 2002; Carey & Mitchell, 2017; Kowalewski, 1991; Mazzei, 2009). Alex Alvarez's definition is one of the most revealing:

"these organizations are created in order to engage in acts of collective violence"(Alvarez, 2006, p. 5). In other words, these groups are generally used against dissident civilians during a state's internal conflicts.

Paramilitary groups have had a very critical role in the mass violence inflicted on Kurds in northern Kurdistan (or Turkish Kurdistan, or southeast Turkey). The Kurdish links to paramilitarism there are twofold. The first is that the Kurds have been the target of violence committed by paramilitary groups formed by the Turkish state elite since late Ottoman times. Second, the state elites have formed various pro-state paramilitary groups *from* the Kurds at different times.

During the Ottoman Empire, in 1891, Sultan Abdulhamid II established the Hamidiye Light Cavalry Regiments (*Hamidiye Hafif Süvari Alayları*) from Kurdish tribes as an auxiliary or paramilitary force. The main goals of the establishment of the regiments was to control two communities (targeting Armenian organisations, controlling Kurds) and to protect the eastern imperial border (Klein, 2002). The Hamidiye regiments are known to have carried out pogroms and massacres together with regular Ottoman troops against members of Armenian movements and Armenian peasants in the east, especially during 1894–96.[3] The most widely known paramilitary force in the late Ottoman period was the Special Organisation (*Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa*) that was founded in 1914 on the initiation of members of the Turkish nationalist party the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP, *İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*). The *Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa* was deployed as death squads that were activated in different parts of the Empire, especially during the genocide of non-Muslims in the east and forced displacement of Greek people (Kieser, 2014; Üngör, 2011).

The ideology of the state elites after the pre-WWI Balkan Wars transformed dramatically into a pan-Turkism. The idea of pan-Turkism held among the CUP elites and Turkish intellectuals began to be expressed very clearly at this time .(Dündar, 2008, pp. 59–60) This idea would develop into a major ideological source for the groups that would found the Republic. The genocide and massacres of non-Muslim and non-Turk people between 1913 and 1922 were a direct expression of this homogeneous society idea of the authorities of the Empire, for which purposes the paramilitary forces were actively used.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, the CUP abolished itself, along with *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*. Former members of the CUP organised a new paramilitary force replacing the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*.(Shaw & Shaw, 2002, p. 340; Zürcher, 2004, p. 135). In addition to the organisations established by the CUP leaders, pro-state gangs were also used against the non-Turkish and non-Muslim populations. Topal (Lame) Osman's gang was one of them. He was the leader of a notorious local band that was an effective paramilitary force during the transitional government period (*Ankara hükümeti*, 1920–23). Topal Osman and his gang perpetrated massacres against the non-Muslim communities (Greek and Armenian) around the eastern Black Sea coast (Frunze, 1978, p. 18). They also committed massacres against Alevi Kurds in Sivas province(Bulut, 2013, p. 114), and against the Koçgiri Kurdish and Pontus (Greek) resistances (1919–21), two uprisings against the Turkish national struggle in the final days of the Empire (Kahraman, 2004, pp. 267–275; Yerasimos, 2010, pp. 345–

[3] (Klein, 2002, p. 158) "There are conflicting reports about Zeki Pasha's hand in the massacres. Some reports claim that he attempted to stop them where he could, while others allege that he was the responsible party, giving orders to the Hamidiye and the regular troops he commanded to murder and plunder."

417). Thus, Topal Osman and his gang became part of the Turkish nationalist struggle led by Mustafa Kemal (Bulut, 2013).

After the establishment of the Republic, Kurdish organisations launched several uprisings against the state. During the Koçuşağı rebellion in Dersim (Tunceli), some Alevi Kurd tribes fought against the other rebel tribes as militia forces alongside the Turkish army (*Genelkurmay Belgelerinde Kürt İsyanları: I*, 2012, pp. 237–262). When the tribes and organisations revolted against the state, the rival tribes or local militia groups would support the state, such as during the Koçuşağı rebellion in 1926 and the second Ağrı operation in 1927 (*Genelkurmay Belgelerinde Kürt İsyanları I*, 1992, pp. 289–310).

Mobilisation of the masses to perpetrate a pogrom involving state-backed paramilitary forces was experienced many times by non-Muslim communities and Alevi Kurds in different periods of the Republic. The Thrace Pogrom of 1934 targeted the Jewish community, the Istanbul Pogrom of 6–7 September 1955 targeted non-Muslims, especially Greeks who lived in Istanbul (Güven, 2005). Alevis, particularly Kurdish Alevis, were another target of the Turkish paramilitary forces, extreme right-wing militias, and vigilantes, especially after the 1960s (Ertan, 2008; Sinclair-Webb, 2003; Tunç, 2015). In the 1970s, leftist groups, trade unions, Kurdish organisations, and the Alevi community all made significant progress in terms of their (political) organisation (Aydın & Taşkın, 2014). For the state's ruling elites, these groups comprised a threat that needed to be eliminated.

Two types of paramilitary groups were mainly used to deal with perceived threats to the state, especially during the pogroms and against dissidents (leftists, Kurdish, Alevi groups) mostly from the 1950s onward. One of them was the Mobilisation Research Council (*Seferberlik Tetkik Kurulu*, STK, 1952), later renamed the Special Warfare Department (*Özel Harp Dairesi*, ÖHD). The other was Idealist Youth (*Ülkücü Gençlik*), which can be considered the vigilante organisation of the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), and included some Islamic youth groups. These two types of paramilitary groups and varieties as perpetrators have been widely discussed as having played an important role in the use of mass violence committed alongside the official security forces (Bora & Can, 1991; Söyler, 2015; *Ülkücü Komando Kampları*, 1997).

Paramilitary groups and their mass violence crystallised particularly against Kurdish civilians in the 1990s. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) launched a war against the Turkish state in 1984, and state elites both formed new paramilitary groups and transformed and used some of the existing ones. These were the Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism Organisation (*Jandarma Istihbarat ve Terorle Mucadele*, JITEM), Village Guards (*Köy Koruculuğu*), the Police Special Operations Unit, or Special Teams (*Polis Özel Harekat Timleri*), and Hizbullah. These groups, along with the official security forces, were responsible for the intense violence that took place in Northern Kurdistan in the 1990s. These groups were predominantly involved in the elimination of pro-PKK civilians, involving, among other things, enforced disappearances, unsolved murders and torture. The members of two of these groups (Village Guards and Hizbullah) were almost entirely Kurdish (Işık, 2020).

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the feedback of the peer reviewers and proofreaders, as well as support of Wendelmoet Hamelink and Welat Zeydanlıoğlu in the realisation of this special issue. We would also like to thank the translators of the abstracts, Aram Rafaat for Sorani, Mahir Tornap for Zazaki, and Hêja Netirk, Sacha Alsancakli, Esat Şanlı and Kübra Sağır for Kurmanji.

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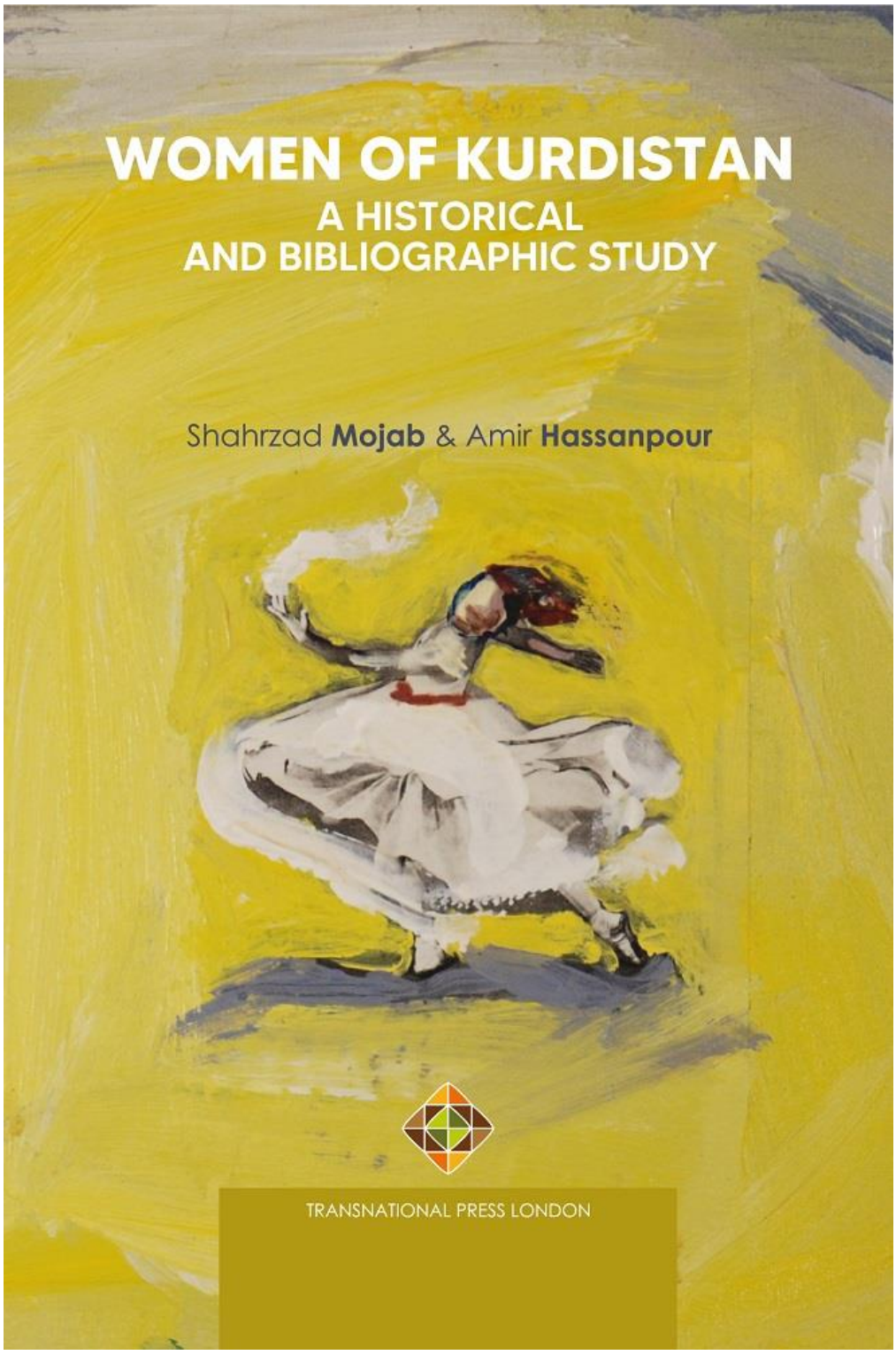

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